



Maldives

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The 1997 Constitution designates Islam as the official state religion. The Government interprets this provision to impose a requirement that citizens be Muslims. Freedom of religion is restricted significantly. The law prohibits the practice of any religion other than Islam. The President is the "supreme authority to propagate the tenets of Islam." Government regulations are based on Islamic law (Shari'a). Non-Muslim foreigners are allowed to practice their religion only privately. Visitors must also refrain from encouraging local citizens to practice any other religion.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and freedom of religion remains severely restricted.

Many citizens regard Islam as one of their society's most distinctive characteristics. They believe that it promotes harmony and national identity.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The Maldives is an archipelago consisting of approximately 1,200 coral atolls and islands scattered over 500 miles in the Indian Ocean southwest of India, and its population is approximately 280,000.

The population is an ethnic mixture, consisting predominantly of South Indians, Sinhalese, and Arabs. Several hundred members of an Indian trading community on the capital island of Malé follow the Shi'a branch of Islam; the rest of the population is Sunni. Non-Muslim foreigners, including more than 500,000 tourists annually (predominantly Europeans and Japanese) and approximately 31,000 foreign workers (predominantly Pakistanis, Sri Lankans, Indians, and Bangladeshis), are allowed to practice their religions only in private.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Freedom of religion is restricted significantly. The 1997 Constitution designates Islam as the official state religion, and the Government interprets this provision to impose a requirement that all citizens be Muslims. Muslim holidays are generally national holidays. Foreign residents are allowed to practice their religion only if they do so privately and do not encourage local citizens to participate. Foreigners are not allowed to import any items deemed "contrary to Islam," including alcohol, pork products, or idols for worship. Alcoholic beverages are available to tourists on resort islands, but it remains against the law to offer alcohol to a local citizen. The Government applies laws based on Shari'a. Civil law is subordinate to Shari'a, which is applied in situations not covered by civil law as well as in certain cases such as divorce and adultery.

Islamic instruction is a mandatory part of the school curriculum, and the Government funds the salaries of instructors of Islam. One school uses Arabic as the medium of instruction, and its curriculum focuses primarily on Islam. Many people who seek further religious education obtain it in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, or other neighboring Islamic countries.

Men who wish to act as imams must sit for public exams and present their scores and credentials to the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, chaired by the Chief Justice. The Supreme Council is the body empowered to certify imams. However, if the Supreme Council denies certification, the petitioner can appeal to the Board of Education.

Imams are responsible only for presenting Friday sermons. They may choose to use a set of government-approved sermons on a variety of topics, but they are not legally empowered to write sermons independently. No one, not even an imam, may publicly discuss Islam unless invited to do so by the Government. According to government officials, this rule is in place in order to maintain a moderate Islamic environment rather than a fundamentalist one.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom has repeatedly stated that no religion other than Islam should be allowed in the country. The Home Affairs Ministry also announced special programs to safeguard and strengthen religious unity. The Government established the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs to provide guidance on religious matters. The Government also has set standards for individuals who conduct Friday services at mosques so that they have adequate theological qualifications.

By law, the President must be a Sunni Muslim, and under the Constitution, he is the "supreme authority to propagate the tenets of Islam." Cabinet ministers also are required to be Sunni. Members of the People's Majlis (Parliament) must be Muslim; however, they are not required to be Sunni. Under the country's Islamic practice, the testimony of two women is required to equal that of one man in matters involving Shari'a such as adultery, finance, and inheritance. In other cases, the testimony of men and women is equal. Shari'a also governs testate inheritance, granting male heirs twice the share of female heirs. The Constitution provides that an accused person has the right to defend himself "in accordance with Shari'a." The Government registers only clubs and other private associations that do not contravene Islamic or civil law.

The law prohibits public statements that are contrary to Islam.

There are no places of worship for adherents of other religions. The Government prohibits the importation of icons and religious statues, but it generally permits the importation of religious literature, such as Bibles, for personal use. The sale of religious items, such as Christmas cards, is restricted to the resort islands patronized by foreign tourists.

The Government prohibits non-Muslim clergy and missionaries from proselytizing or conducting public worship services. Conversion of a Muslim to another faith is a violation of Shari'a and may result in a loss of the convert's citizenship; however, there are no known cases of converts losing citizenship because of their conversion. Faith-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are not specifically excluded by law from operating, but according to UN Development Program personnel in the country, the government would have turned away any non-Islamic faith-based groups. When Friends of Maldives, a United Kingdom-based charity, had British school children pack buckets of school materials for children in the Maldives, the Government inspected the packages, found Christmas stories, and removed the stories before the buckets were distributed.

Parents must raise their children to be Muslim because citizens must be Muslim. Foreigners can raise their children to follow any religion as long as they practice only privately in their homes or hotel rooms and do not try to include local citizens in their worship.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The law limits a citizen's right to freedom of expression to protect "the basic tenets of Islam." According to Amnesty International and other sources, in January 2002, four individuals were arrested for distributing extremist Islamist and antigovernment literature in an electronic newsletter. Both the promotion of Islamic extremism and the promotion of other religions are prohibited. In July 2002, after being convicted of the charges, three of the defendants were sentenced to life imprisonment, and the fourth was given a 10-year sentence.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Most citizens regard Islam as one of their society's most distinctive characteristics and believe that it promotes harmony and national identity and helps remove any desire for different groups to break away from the state. The President regularly encourages all citizens to strengthen their religious unity.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government does not maintain an embassy in the Maldives; the U.S. Ambassador in Colombo, Sri Lanka, is also accredited to the Government in Malé. The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)